

GLUTTONY

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The room smells of pig meat and grease. Crumpled McDonald's bags litter coffee table and windowsill. A couple has unpacked Styrofoam containers of Egg McMuffins, sausages, bacon, fries. Ketchup stains the man's pastel track suit. He's in the room's sole recliner; his companion has squeezed herself into a chair at his side. They pass containers back and forth; they grunt and groan with breakfast pleasure. Something drips onto the carpet. Unseemly Behavior with Food. There must, I think, be some place on Earth where this is at least a misdemeanor, on a par, say, with jaywalking or turnstile jumping. Thirty years since I've eaten meat, and the animal stench is overpowering. It's Day-I've-Lost-Count of accompanying Jeff to the hospital, and I'm past all charity.

We're in what I've come to think of as the holding pen for the chemo suite—a small, close room where patients wait to be assigned a nurse. It has a TV, this room, and the TV is set to Jerry Springer. Someone has stolen someone's man. Words fly, then chairs. The woman laughs, her mouth a mess of McMuffin. The man's phone rings and he begins to shout over the televised ruckus about motherfucker this and that.

I glare at them. Jeff glares at them. Useless, like flinging pebbles into the sea. Perhaps it's just as well. Emotions run high in this room; I've seen fights break out. People exhausted, sick, utterly powerless, and needing to assert control over something, even if it's just a TV show. I shut my eyes and silently chant the chant I've learned

in yoga class, trying to achieve a kind of psychic white space. Nothing feels easy.

The woman with the snack cart has apples and bananas. She has smoked turkey sandwiches that, she claims, she made herself, roasting the turkey at home. She makes this joke every time.

We're in a relatively quiet corner of the suite, at some distance from the McDonald's couple, who are still watching talk shows on their ceiling mounted TV. The snack cart bananas are mottled, the Red Delicious apples look waxy. Jeff takes a bottle of water.

"That's all?" the snack lady asks. "Sure you don't want a sandwich?"

Like everyone here—the doctors and nurses, the dietician and social worker and physician assistants—she wants the patients to eat. Protein, especially, which is difficult given Jeff's new aversion to fish. He's lost his appetite for all sorts of things, obvious things like food and sex and, perhaps less obviously, conversation, music, sleep. Though he sleeps more than ever, he does so fitfully, rising early, waking during the night. Whether

all of this will prove temporary is a thing we cannot know.

I've offered to cook meat for him. I don't exactly know how, having never bought meat before, but if he's willing to eat it, I'm willing to give it a try. The reasons I don't eat meat are the usual ones: climate, health, abattoir. But long before I'd thought about any of these, it was the bacon that made me quit.

My mother used to cook bacon on Sunday mornings. The strips sizzled in their own fat, which she'd pour into a Maxwell House coffee can that was kept under the kitchen sink with the Comet and ammonia and bleach. Whenever the can filled up, she'd toss it away. One morning, during my last year of high school, she asked me to get the can from under the sink. It was way in the back, behind those other containers with their warning labels: Keep Out of Reach of Children and Hazardous if Swallowed. I opened the lid. The can was nearly full, the congealed fat a dull white lump. It looked foreign, not like food. Yet we'd eaten this.

I did not decide in that moment to become a vegetarian,

but I didn't eat the bacon that morning nor the sausages we had for dinner that night. I told my mother I was going off meat, temporarily. I've yet to go back on.

Jeff doesn't want meat. He doesn't want cooked vegetables or beans and rice or soup. Salads are out of the question. Mostly he eats pasta, buttered in a bowl. Soft cooked eggs. Ice cream to keep the weight on. Children's food.

Because of this I'm eating less too, avoiding the things that make him nauseous. I love strong, pungent foods. Kimchee. Stinky cheeses. Mackerel, blue fish pate, mushrooms that hold the scent of their soil. For the six months of his treatment I've given them up. It's a minor sacrifice, a nothing thing, but I still feel the lack. Not so much for the food itself as for the way it shapes our lives.

Jeff and I are both thin and because of this people sometimes assume that we don't care about food. Yet food—its procurement and preparation and presentation, the way it delineates time—is crucial to our life together. On our first date, we had lunch at a sushi place, on our second we had Indian food.

For our third date Jeff offered to make dinner, a kind of crustless quiche he calls Watergate Pie because the recipe is scrawled on stationery from the Watergate Hotel. I was impressed, even more so when I saw that he had a roll of wax paper in his kitchen drawer. Only someone seriously devoted to the culinary arts, I reasoned, would have wax paper. *A cook!* I thought. *I've scored!* I wasn't wrong about this, but I wasn't exactly right either. The Watergate pie, the tuna melt, omelets and tomato sauce, these are the staples of Jeff's kitchen repertoire. Comfort food. He leaves the more adventurous cooking to me, is the willing taster for my experiments.

Every weekend, even in winter, we go to the farmers market at Lincoln Center. We mark spring by the first appearance of dandelion greens, which I bake in a pie with ricotta and onions. When asparagus is in season we eat it almost daily: roasted with garlic, steamed and drizzled with aioli, or raw in salads. Hadley Grass, they call it in western Massachusetts, where we used to live, and the shops put up signs warning customers when the

last batch came in. For two years Jeff lived in Ecuador, where he developed a taste for ceviche, so I learned to make that, too. Scallops in vodka; flounder with lemon, orange, and tomato juices; shrimp and octopus with red onions, limes and jalapeno. In August Jeff stuffs his backpack with ears of corn that we haul home on the subway then freeze for winter use, as if our little Harlem kitchen were some prairie outpost. Thanksgiving means curried squash and mushroom soup, Christmas a five fish stew. Twice a year, on our June anniversary and on the November weekend that falls between our birthdays, we splurge on a meal in a fancy restaurant.

We're lucky in this, I know. Lucky to afford the food we like and the time it takes to prepare. Not just the obvious kitchen time but all of the lead up—the riffling through cookbooks, the search for new ingredients, the small talk with farmers. There are people, my mother is one, for whom this is just so much fuss. A single woman with a high school education and two kids to raise, the last thing my mother wanted after coming home from work was to toil in the

kitchen. She was tired, we were hungry, there were dishes and baths and homework to get through. Dinner needed to be cheap and it needed to be quick. Hamburger Helper. Tuna casserole. Meatloaf with Tater Tots. And, of course, McDonald's.

For Jeff and me dinner is a curtain falling on our day. Work transitions to leisure, a time for conversation and catching up. No matter the meal, we have candles, music, wine. For a while we tried to keep doing this. Not the wine part, but the rest of it. I thought the rituals might be reassuring, might help fool us into believing that things hadn't really changed. But Jeff was too tired to sit at the table, too sick to eat. He'd try a mouthful of food. He'd watch me eat, which made me uncomfortable. There was nothing to talk about—nothing, that is, except for what we didn't want to talk about. So we moved to coffee table and couch. With the lights off and the TV on, we didn't feel so much pressure to eat.

In his essay "Coming Home Again," Chang Rae Lee writes of learning to cook by watching his mother in the kitchen instead of playing

outside with the other boys. He describes how his mother butterflied a butchered short rib, glazing it with sugar crystals, mincing garlic, ginger root, and scallions into a marinade of sesame oil and soy sauce. When, in the final stages of stomach cancer, his mother is barely able to eat, Lee's family still gathers for dinner each night. "The point was simply to sit together at the kitchen table and array ourselves like a family again." Food was the pretext for that, food let the family cohere.

On New Year's Eve 1990, a week before her death, Lee makes a feast of Korean finger dishes, hoping to coax his mother's appetite. She tries to eat a piece of salmon toast, then lets it fall from her mouth. "She attempted a bean cake, some cheese, a piece of fruit, but nothing was any use." Her inability to share in the meal he made leaves Lee feeling "lost."

Jeff does not have stomach cancer. He's not dying, not in any immediate sense. His leukemia is incurable, but it can be treated. It will go away then come back. Each time it returns his remission will be shorter. Two, three times at most before the treatments will stop

working. Ten years perhaps. That's all of the time in the world—and none.

Everyone is eating. Bananas, apples, muffins from Starbucks, chips from the snack cart. I ask Jeff if he'd like me to go to the Greek diner at the corner. I could bring back some hummus or souvlaki. I could get a chicken salad sandwich from Starbucks or some ice cream from the lobby cafe. How about it?

In fact, neither one of us is hungry. It's Wednesday, his long day, when he gets three chemo drugs instead of the usual two. The "extra" drug, Rituximab, causes fever and nausea; it has to be dripped in slowly. From start to finish it's a six hour day. By the end of it, I'm famished.

The treatments make Jeff carsick, a thing we found out early on in a stalled cab near Central Park West. Because of this we always take the subway home. It's two trains, the local at 59th then the express at 72nd. Today is unusually warm; the platforms will be hot. At Ninth Avenue we come to a pocket park, a small raised plaza with metal tables and chairs, a couple of locust trees. There's a

kind of kiosk, too, a big red cylinder that looks like a squashed soda can. "Pizza in the Park" its yellow awning says and, sure enough, inside the cylinder a man is heating up slices.

"You hungry?" Jeff asks.

He stakes out a table; I wait in line. The pizza slices are huge. I'm halfway through mine before I can taste it, before the hunger abates enough. The crust is crispy, the sauce just the right side of sweet. It's remarkably good.

This park we're in has a green space, a scabby patch of land wedged into the southeast corner of the block. It's bordered by a corrugated metal fence, neon green, with white lettering that reads "Balsey Park." Who knew this place existed? But that's the thing about living in New York. For better or worse, something new is always popping up. One learns to anticipate the unexpected.

On the lawn a dog is peeing against a tree. "No Dogs on Grass or in Garden," a sign on the tree says. "Do Not Feed the Pigeons."

Along the avenue a farmers market has been set up. Stalls heaped with carrots, scallions, beets. If they had peas I could make pea

bouillabaisse, something I know Jeff will eat. But the time for peas has passed. Already I'm thinking about the next meal. Focusing on the future, even if it's just dinner, is a way to take myself out of the present. In the chemo suite, that can be an advantage.

The locust leaves make lacy shadows on the ground. Every table is occupied. A group of old men plays dominoes; a woman with a stroller types something into her phone. Someone scatters sandwich remains to the hovering pigeons. To our surprise, and despite his oncologist's warnings, Jeff has not lost his hair. Looking at him you would not think "cancer patient." We are just two people eating pizza in a park in the neighborhood known as Hell's Kitchen.

We eat slowly, we take our time. Jeff finishes his slice. "That was good," he says. When we get home he'll need to nap. He'll wake up feeling awful. In the morning we'll be back at the hospital. Right now though there is only this table in the shade, this park and food and water, the trees and sun. Everything else feels remote.

The farmers are packing up. It's our last chance to grab

something from the market
before they cart it all off. What
do we need? I think. Do we need
anything? But in this moment, just
this moment, sated at last and for
the time being, I realize that we do
not.